

## LITERARY GENIUS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL.

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**I**N some respects the most remarkable of ancient literatures and that which has had the largest influence in the development of human civilization for a long period, has been so obscured and distorted by the sanctity imposed upon it by the people who produced it, that due credit has never been given to their literary genius. It is by no means the earliest of literatures in its origin, and before its completion that of Greece had reached its highest excellence.

The tenacity of the sacredness originally imposed upon it, and its preservation as a conglomerate but compact mass for so many centuries, has been mainly due to the fact that it is not merely a collection of the "works" of individual authors laboring independently, and is only in a small measure identified with the time or personality of the actual writers. It is the composite production of the highest genius of a whole people working in the main with one purpose and toward one common end during several centuries of an experience such as no other people ever passed through. In this colossal work of unconscious literary cooperation there was no pride of authorship, and no respect for the personal claims of authors. What one generation produced another was free to work over and adapt to the conceptions and aspirations of its own time, casting into oblivion any material that did not serve its purpose. There was excision and expansion, blending, transmuting and recension until at last the whole mass was compacted, roughly and with little skill but with sufficient cohesion, into one body and sealed as a sacred heritage to posterity. Thus it became, in a broad but legitimate sense of the term, the epic of that people's life for a thousand years, embodying their history and experience as their best minds interpreted it, their highest conceptions, their best thoughts, their loftiest sentiment, their utmost wisdom and highest hopes. This treasure was imbedded in much grosser matter and it varied in qual-

ity and value, but it received a kind of consecration that for ages forbade analysis.

That this literature was worked out and finally wrought together in this unexampled manner was due to the peculiar character and circumstances of the people from whose genius it emanated. Coming together as a congeries of nomadic tribes and clans, mostly of kindred blood, seeking a country in which they could settle down and become a nation, they had gained by conquest a narrow territory which was shut in from the sea, and isolated at the time from the sovereignty of the great powers which had previously ruled over it in succession, though it was still traversed by the caravan and military route between them. For a long time they were beset by enemies and had to struggle for national existence; their first kingdom fell apart and formed two rival nations with a varied history, and finally one after the other of these was destroyed by the powers of the East. But there survived a remnant of that peculiar people which saved its treasures of literature, gave them their final gloss and put upon them the seal of sanctity.

This people brought into the country which they conquered a religion and a worship which they cherished as their exclusive possession. They had a conception of one deity who was their God alone and whose sole people they were. This conception grew with their progress until from a tribal deity, watching over his own, jealous of other gods, fighting against them and destroying their worshippers, he became the God of the universe, the creator of the heavens and the earth, the sovereign power over all mankind, but was always peculiarly the God of Israel, who would finally make them the great ruling nation of the earth, as they fondly believed.

Faith in this deity, fear of his anger and his power, and trust in his love and goodness, as they conceived of his attributes, were fostered until devotion to him became the ruling passion of the people's teachers and the constant burden of the literature that they held worthy of preservation. This faith was the chief inspiration of the writers; and as it expanded, it moulded the growing mass of their work into one body, by no means homogeneous, harmonious or symmetrical, but sufficiently coherent to be held together and consecrated as the "word" of their God, uttered through his chosen speakers and writers.

That the genius of Israel, inspired with this faith, should have left such a body of literature as a sacred heritage to the people out of whose life and experience it had grown, is not so remarkable as the reverence in which it was afterwards held by peoples of wholly

different origin and character. This was partly due to the fact that Christianity sprang from the bosom of Judaism, but far more to the fact that, when it took root and spread outside of Semitic soil it developed dogmas which were derived largely from other sources but were linked with promises and fore-shadowings in this old literature of Israel. This gave it a new consecration and a new vitality. The Jewish sanctity became a kind of divinity which it was sacrilege to question, because upon it rested some of the chief dogmas of the Christian church. This distorted and obscured the work of Israel's literary genius, placed it in a false light and threw over it a delusive glamor to awe the superstitious soul into submission to teachings of which that genius never dreamed, but which it was forced into supporting.

It is only within two or three generations that modern scholarship has grown bold enough to disregard the ban of sacrilege and by rational study to reveal in its true character the one great literature which in its beginnings and highest development antedated the earliest classics of Europe. Hardly yet can the literary genius of Israel be treated as a power of the human mind working according to its natural lights and capacities and within the limitations of its heredity and its environment, without giving offense to sensibilities that have been wrought into a morbid state. But only by such treatment can its work be truly appreciated and its real value be estimated. By treating the literary production of that genius as human in the fullest sense a new interest is given to it, and it may be rescued from the neglect or indifference into which as a whole it has fallen in recent years, notwithstanding the fact that it is still more widely published and disseminated than any other. Few read it at the present day except in detached parts, and the younger generation knows little of it save by what it hears expounded from the pulpit, mostly in the old doctrinal way. Humanly regarded, it is of exceeding interest, and it loses nothing of genuine ethical or religious value by being truly understood. It is open to reason, as to faith, to believe that there is a divine power behind all human development and progress, but it cannot reasonably be confined in its direct activity within the limits of one contracted country, working through one small people, however "peculiar," at one particular stage of human history. The literature of ancient Israel is by all intrinsic and external evidence shown to be as human in origin and character as that of Egypt, or Babylon, Persia or Greece, or that of any modern era.

Like other literatures it began with oral tradition of primitive

days and the early movements of the people. To aid the memory these became embodied in fixed forms of tales and songs, recited or chanted from generation to generation. It was after the kindred or allied tribes and clans had been roughly welded into something like a nation and was divided into two kingdoms that the floating traditions of old days were reduced to written legends and stories of heroes and deeds of the past. Later, as reflection and imagination developed in this genius, it created a mythical ancestry of the people and their various tribes, and for all the human race, and sought to account for the origin of things, as human genius has been doing from the earliest to the latest day in history, and will continue to do while history lasts. The first writers were not without material for their work outside of their own traditions and imaginings. Long before their nation was born their land had been ruled successively by the empires of the Euphrates and the Nile and was still on the great highway between them. They were neighbors of an older people than themselves in Phenicia. They borrowed or appropriated conceptions and suggestions where they came within their mental reach and transmuted them to their purpose.

Mythical accounts, largely borrowed and transformed by the native genius, of the creation of the world and the origin of its inhabitants; of the destruction of the first race of men by the baffled deity, except for one favored family from which had descended all the known peoples, dispersed abroad by the confusion of their language when they had the temerity to seek cohesion and to scale the abode of the gods by building a tower to heaven; and of the choice of a progenitor for all the tribes of Israel and a promise to make of them a great nation in which all the world would be blessed,—these appeared in more than one version in the two kingdoms, not far from the time when the material of the epics of Greece was accumulating, less than a thousand years before the Christian era. Stories, equally mythical or fabulous, were developed regarding the descendants of Abraham, the ancestors of the tribes and of the related peoples of the region in which they dwelt, symbolizing their kinship, real or fancied, their early alliances and their enmities. To account for their wanderings and struggles before they gained possession of the land which became their settled home, stories were told of how their patriarchal ancestors had been driven by famine within the borders of Egypt, where they fell under a galling servitude from which they were rescued by their God with wonderful demonstrations of his superior might.

After one of the two kingdoms had been destroyed by Assyrian



conquerors the different versions of the early myths were blended and expanded and turned to account as a framework for the laws by which priests and rulers were to induce submission and obedience to their authority, giving to these ordinances the character of divine commands and the awful sanction of a direct revelation of the deity's resistless will. Israel was not the first or the last people to impute the ruling authority or the source of law to the deity; but no other people ever established so intimate a relation between their God and themselves, or made themselves so abjectly dependent upon his power and his favor, which was to be won only by unswerving devotion to him. Their earliest writers taught that their God had brought their ancestor from the East and given him their land, promising that his descendants should become a great nation and binding them under a solemn compact to worship and obey him and him alone.

The essentially mythical character of this material in the story of Israel cannot be doubted by any one who will read that story with an unbiased mind, nor will he doubt that it is the work of genius of a high order. Divested of the sophistication of the latest priestly writers, who sought to transform it more completely to their purpose, it has an exceeding human quality, sometimes grossly human, and a marvelous simplicity and force. As illustrations of that peculiar myth-making genius, note well the stories of Abraham and Lot, symbolizing the remote relationship with the hated people of Moab and Ammon; of Hagar and Ishmael, imputing to Israel's great ancestor the origin of the lawless denizens of the Arabian peninsula; of the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca, and of Jacob and the daughters of Laban, as a twofold cementing of the relationship with Syria and as exemplifying the superior craft and skill of the younger people; of the successful supplanting of the primacy of Edom by defrauding Esau of his birthright as the elder of twin nations; and finally the immortal story of Joseph and his brothers as an explanation of the tradition of the sojourn in Egypt, which was to give occasion for the marvelous rescue under the lead of Moses and the tremendous demonstration at Mount Sinai, as the prelude to that promulgation and development of law which was not complete until a thousand years later, but was all attributed to that great revelation in the wilderness.

How deny that work like this is compact of myth and fable and not at the same time accept as facts of history the tales of gods and men, the miracles and the marvels, which make up so much of the material of the epics of ancient Greece? Why deny to the

writers of ancient Israel the imagination, the power of invention and the motive for glorifying their own origin and history which have been the common endowment of men since the human intellect awoke to an interest in their fate? Why deprive that one people of the gift of literary genius and make dummies of their greatest writers?

I have dwelt upon the mythical element in this literature because it is best calculated to impress the idea of its human rather than divine origin, since all human genius has worked in that way in its primitive stages, and because the enlightened modern mind cannot accept the results as either representations of fact or of divine truth. In other ways the literary genius of ancient Israel worked in a very human fashion; but its unique peculiarity in its later stages was the idea that everything in Israel's life was dominated by the direct influence of the deity, conceived as in a special sense the God of his own "chosen people," to whose destiny everything else was subordinate. That idea was the product of an enormous race pride which has preserved the offspring of Judah from extinction or absorption "even unto this day." This appears in the legends and the history, as well as the myth and fable, of the literature that was wrought into one great epic of their life; and it is the dominating note of the ardent and eloquent utterances of the orators whom translators of their language have converted into "prophets."

Legends of the heroic age, when the tribes were slowly growing and preparing for the coalescence under the pressure of necessity for mutual defense which ultimately resulted in a loosely united nation, were originally mere stories of the doughty deeds of warriors in the conflict with enemies. Bands of invaders were repelled, predatory neighbors were driven back, tribal wrongs were avenged, and there was continual conflict with the Philistines who held the land between the hill country and the sea. As first written down, after the establishment of a monarchy and the division into two kingdoms, these tales of the old days, when there was no ordered government and "every man did that which was right in his own eyes," were of a truly barbaric character. So far as the supernatural entered in, as it did in all heroic tales of primitive times, it was of the mythical order. Mutilated fragments of the oldest metrical form survive. One of them pictures the God of the people as coming to their rescue in battle, careering over the mountains of Edom from his abode on Mount Sinai in storm and tempest.

There were defeats as well as victories, and oppression as well

as triumph. It was long after one kingdom, that in which most of these tales had originated in written form, had been destroyed, and the other was beset by powerful enemies from the East, that a new doctrine of theocracy was developed and embodied in a code of divine commands, carried back to the last days of the struggle in "the wilderness" and the eve of the conquest of "the promised land." This was in itself a work of genius, but it was the culmination of generations of progress in conceptions of the relation of the people to their God. Its central doctrine was their absolute dependence upon him, and the necessity of his exclusive worship and of unquestioning submission to his laws, as revealed through priest and prophet, for the salvation of the nation from its enemies and the fulfilment of the promise of perpetuity in the land which their God had given to their great ancestor.

In the light of this doctrine all the historic legends were newly edited. Defeats and calamities were attributed to disobedience to Israel's real lord and king or neglect of his worship as their one God and the enemy of all other gods and their worshipers. Each rescue from peril, each victory over enemies, was due to repentance and calling upon him and the raising up of a deliverer. What in the relation of events did not accord with this doctrine was in rude and imperfect fashion suppressed or modified to conform to it.

When the history of the kingdoms was roughly compiled from the rude annals of the successive rulers, it was treated in the same manner. It was the favor of the deity that brought victory or success or prosperity in any reign, for some reason that was made palpable. It was his anger that brought disaster or calamity of whatever kind, and reason was found for that. Marvels and miracles were matters of course in human experience under the beliefs of those days in all lands. One kingdom was destroyed and its land was devastated by Assyrian armies because its people and their rulers had been false to the worship of Israel's God and had failed to observe his laws and obey his chosen servants. That, at least, was the doctrine and the belief of the writers of the other kingdom who recorded their fate. Every menace that hung over the surviving nation was a warning or a threat, and when that was unheeded and reliance was placed upon other power than the great God Yahveh, his favor and support were withdrawn and the power of Babylon was used as a chastisement. The holy city was desecrated and Mount Zion became a subject of wailing and lamentation until the expiation was complete.

This theocratic doctrine was the creation of the Hebrew genius,

and it has had a powerful influence in human history from that time to this. It was the burden of the solemn warnings, the eloquent appeals, the fierce denunciations and threats of those ardent orators, who have been called "the prophets," and who made a harsh and inflexible language vibrate and resound through the world and down the generations, imparting its tone to other tongues. In these and a few poets imbued with the same spirit, the literary genius of Israel reached its culmination.

Its chief inspiration was not a power outside of itself, through it uttering what it did not know or understand and imparting to the world truths of nature, truths of history or truths of religion of permanent validity. The mass of its work was as purely human in kind, in character and quality, as that of any other ancient people.

But that doctrine of theocracy, as developed by the "prophets" and afterwards debased by the priests, served to transmute it sufficiently to weld it together into one mass and give it a kind of sanctity that preserved it as a single whole and made it in effect an epic of the life, the achievement, the contribution to the world's progress, of one of the least of ancient peoples in its dominion and secular power, but the only one that has sent a clear strain of itself down through history with an invincible solidarity.